

Begging For Change

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The problem of homelessness can feel overwhelming for an individual person to address. You'd have to be inhuman to not be touched to some degree by the plight of someone who is down on their luck, for whatever reason. Many people experiencing homelessness struggle with [mental illness](#), [addiction](#), or [previous incarceration](#), and we don't know how to provide meaningful help. Some are victims of circumstance, fighting their way back from

catastrophe. We might donate to charities, but feel awkward when someone's got a sign, begging at an intersection. I know I feel awkward. I can't imagine the desperation that would drive someone to sitting outside in the beating sun, pouring rain, or drifting snow, breathing in exhaust all day, trying to collect change from passing motorists.

There's a couple of people experiencing homelessness I have noticed regularly in my neighborhood for whom I buy sack lunches when I see them around. I've also given gift cards (to Safeway, Fred Meyer, Starbucks) and [Care Kits with socks](#) to people living in "homeless camps" in my area. I've been down on my luck before, and there have been times I wouldn't have made it were it not for the kindness of friends, so even when I have very little, I try to share. When you share with others less fortunate, you send a subtle message to your own psyche that you have "enough." But it's not enough to help one person for one day; what can I do that will change the [conditions that cause homelessness](#), or help people recover from having lost everything?

It breaks my heart to see people living on the streets. It's a national tragedy, a travesty. In "[A Single, Lucid Moment](#)," Robert Soderstrom recounts the response of people living in Papua New Guinea to the homeless epidemic in the US. It was impossible for villagers to comprehend the idea that humanity was host to such an injustice as people living in the streets in America – a country with immense wealth far surpassing that of Papua New Guinea - and resorting to begging. However, Americans have seen it so often that we have become immune to repeated scenes of humans reduced to living without any humanity.

Once, a client was complaining at length about a person he saw defecating in the street. He kept going on and on about how disgusting it was, and that someone should do something about all the "dirty beggars." I tried to hold my tongue because he was a customer, but eventually I was so repulsed by him that I sardonically asked, "Well, where would you like him to poop?"

He looked at me, aghast that I had challenged him. I took advantage of his shocked silence to continue, “Have you ever noticed the signs in coffeshops or grocery stores that say, ‘Restrooms For Customers Only’? If you have no money, then you can’t be a customer. If you have no home, then you have no toilet. But the poop is going to come out. So, imagine how awful it must be to be reduced to having nowhere to poop, and you are forced to do it on the street. Imagine how awful it must be to live in such extreme circumstances that you no longer care if you poop on the street. The real tragedy is not that he pooped on the street, but that we live in a society where he has to do it.”

The client was silent for a moment before he said, quietly, “ I never thought about it that way before.”

He quickly recovered, though, and came back defensively with, “Well why should I pay for someone to have a place to live when I have to work for a living?”

I told him that chronically homeless people cost the government a lot of money when they're living on the street because of the services used to manage them, such as emergency rooms, police departments, jails, and the judiciary system. “If you want to look at it purely as a financial matter (ignoring for a moment that we should actually *want* to help other people, I thought to myself), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) estimates that the annual cost is [about \\$40,000 per person](#). If you have just 100 people experiencing homelessness in our city, that’s about four million dollar annual cost to taxpayers. *Per year*. Wouldn’t it be a [more effective use of resources](#) just to provide them a place to live?”

Having nothing left to say, he frowned thoughtfully and said I made a good point. I didn’t want to lose him by pressing my advantage, so I thanked him for listening to my perspective and suggested we get on with our business. I did not, however, hear from him again.

In [“Catching Homelessness,”](#) Dr. Josephine Ensign describes how she lost her job, home, and family, and she shares how depression robbed her of the ability to effectively manage her own life. [Her story](#) depicts how easy it can be for a “regular” person with a “good” job to fall through the cracks and become another statistic. “[I] lost the vestiges of my faith, my marriage, my job, my home, my sanity—more or less in that order,” she said.

After couch surfing, living in her car and in abandoned sheds, she adopted some “radical” changes to get her life back on track and is now a professor at the University of Washington. However, a multitude of people who shared her situation do not share her success in transcending it. Ensign speaks about her story in hopes that we can learn from it, that we can – much like my naïve client – think about it differently.

If you have felt judgemental of homeless people, this is an opportunity to understand them in a more compassionate way. Blaming the poor and homeless for their plight is a defense mechanism we developed to help us cope with the tragedy before our eyes, the inhumanity of actual humans living in the gutters, under bridges, in boxes. After all, what can we do, as individuals? I'm occasionally left feeling bad for not giving more, but sometimes I feel like I'm asked so often for money by strangers that I've almost become resentful of it, and that makes me so very sad. Sad for the state of our society where there are so many that have nothing, that the few of us who have barely enough are jealously guarding it against the vast number of people begging for change.

I'm begging for change, too.

In [Seattle](#), if you want real change, you can just buy it. [Real Change](#) is a an award-winning street newspaper that provides immediate economic opportunity for people who are low-income and homeless; it is often distributed by them directly. I've seen people experiencing homelessness offering Real Change outside grocery stores or shops; I avoided them because I wanted to circumvent one of those awkward interactions. Thanks to Dr. Ensign, I realized I was the awkward one. Real Change can be read online, but it would be nicer to buy one for a mere \$2 from one of the legitimate street vendors. They pay 60¢ for each \$2 issue they sell; that \$1.40 profit helps feed and house them on a daily basis, and they're always happy to receive more than \$2 for an issue. Each of these vendors sets a daily goal of sales by virtue of how many they buy. I imagine it gives them confidence; each vendor is personally invested in the venture, that's a person I'd like to help. If you see someone selling Real Change, please consider buying one. Even if you don't want the paper, the \$2 could make a huge difference to the person selling it. I spend \$5 on a latte, I can skip that and help another human being eat for a day.

If you are not in Seattle, you can still buy “real change,” but the payoff is going to take a little longer. By supporting Housing First, you can help an established organization that prioritizes providing permanent housing to people experiencing homelessness, thus ending their homelessness and serving as a platform from which they can pursue personal goals and improve their quality of life. This approach is guided by the belief that people need basic necessities like food and a place to live before attending to anything less critical, such as getting a job, budgeting properly, or attending to substance use issues. Their approach is supported by evidence generated from almost 40 years of advocacy as well as partnership with the [Homelessness Research Institute](#). The State of Utah was the first to take the Housing First model statewide; over a ten-year period, [they reduced chronic homelessness by 91%](#). Utah hasn't solved all of its issues related to homelessness, and they still have a substantial average number of people experiencing housing crises, but they have developed a proven strategy that makes better use of their available resources, changes the public perception of people experiencing homelessness, and returns some dignity and humanity back to some of its most vulnerable residents.

The problem of homelessness won't change until we all work towards finding a solution together. I don't know what that will be, but I can't live with myself if I don't try to find out.

Photo by Matt Collamer on Unsplash

https://unsplash.com/photos/man-holding-card-with-seeking-human-kindness-text-8UG90AYPDW4?utm_content=creditShareLink&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=unsplash